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ROME CONFERENCE ENDS WITHOUT LEBANON CEASE-FIRE PLAN

Leaders call for stabilization force, end to
violence, humanitarian aid

By Lea Terhune
Washington File Staff Writer

Washington – World leaders intent on resolving the conflict in Lebanon ended their meeting in Rome with an agreement on the urgency of formulating a “sustainable” plan to stop the warfare, but without a call for an immediate cease-fire. They also pledged to provide humanitarian relief to the victims of the hostilities between Israel and Hizballah.

“The Rome conference participants expressed their determination to work immediately to reach, with the utmost urgency, a cease-fire that put an end to the current violence and hostilities. The cease-fire must be lasting, permanent and sustainable,” Italian foreign minister Massimo D’Alema told journalists in Rome July 26, as he presented the statement framed by conference participants. The conference was organized and hosted by the Italian government.

D’Alema said there was broad support for a meeting of partner countries to discuss an international stabilization force to assist the Lebanese government. D’Alema also said participating countries have pledged to work “in partnership with the international community to provide immediate humanitarian relief to the people of Lebanon,” and expressed “their deep concern for civil-

ian casualties and suffering.” The group called on Israel to exercise “utmost restraint.”

At the same press conference, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice echoed his words. “We are all agreed that we want most urgently to end the violence on a basis that this time will be sustainable.” She said the region has had “too many broken cease-fires, too many spasms of violence.”

Rice reiterated the U.S. commitment to humanitarian assistance, commenting on the “impassioned” appeal of Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora.

Siniora, also at the press conference, said “the country is being cut to pieces.” Saying he had hoped for an immediate cease-fire, he acknowledged that progress had been made “in terms of really handling all the issues.” He said, “[W]e have to work together in order to arrive at a cease-fire that can really protect Lebanon.”

D’Alema said “a framework of international decisions” exists in U.N. Security Council Resolution 435 and Resolution 1559, the Taif Accords, the 1949 armistice agreement and the Group of Eight (G8) statement of July 16, all of which provide for the sovereignty of the Lebanese government.

“[T]he people of Lebanon deserve a stable, democratic, fully sovereign Lebanon at peace with itself and at peace with its neighbors,” Rice added.

She said that the group at the Rome meeting agreed that “there should be an international force under a U.N. mandate that will have a strong and robust capability to help bring about peace.” She noted that the participation of Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt in the conference ensured regional participation in the effort.

Syria was absent but not forgotten at the conference, where its role in backing Hizballah was discussed, along with Syria’s obligations to support the government of Lebanon gain control of the country under Resolution 1559. “[I]t’s not a question of talking to Syria; it’s a question of whether Syria is prepared to act,” Rice said.

At his press briefing in Washington, White House press secretary Tony Snow said the Rome statement demonstrated “a pretty united voice” in support of setting up conditions for an “endurable” cease-fire.

He also placed responsibility for the crisis on Hizballah. “Hizballah has to make the decision,” he said. “Does it want to take a military path or does it want to take a political path? ... If they choose the terror path, you have to find ways to make them cease and desist.”

Tom Casey, a State Department spokesman, told reporters at his July 26 briefing that Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Welch and the National Security Council’s Elliot Abrams would remain in the region to work on distribution of humanitarian aid and to work “with the international community on how we can best support Lebanon to take full sovereignty over the country and to be able to deploy its armed forces to the south.”

A transcript of the press conference in Rome is available on the State Department Web site.

IRAQI PRIME MINISTER SEES IRAQ AS CENTRAL TO WAR ON TERROR

Nuri al-Maliki highlights political, social progress since fall of former regime

By David Shelby
Washington File Staff Writer

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki pauses during a speech to a joint meeting of Congress on Wednesday, July 26, 2006. Washington – Iraq is the central battle that will determine the outcome of the War on Terror, according to Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, and it is the responsibility of all liberal democracies to support Iraq’s struggle to overcome the forces seeking to tear it apart.

“Should democracy be allowed to fail in Iraq and terror permitted to triumph, then the War on Terror will never be won elsewhere,” al-Maliki told a joint session of the U.S. Congress July 26, one day after he met with President Bush at the White House.

The prime minister said that any loss to terrorism is a loss for all humanity. At the heart of this conflict, he said, is a struggle for the soul of Islam.

“Let me be very clear,” he said. “This is a battle between true Islam, for which a person’s liberty and rights

constitute essential cornerstones, and terrorism, which wraps itself in a fake Islamic cloak, in reality, wages a war on Islam and Muslims and values and spreads hatred between humanity.”

Terrorism has no religion and is contrary to Islamic teachings, he said.

The Iraqi prime minister said the ongoing violence in his country has overshadowed significant progress that has been achieved since the fall of Saddam Hussein. He said a new Iraq is “emerging from the ashes of dictatorship.”

“We have gone from a one-party state ruled by a small elite to a multiparty system where politics is the domain of every citizen and parties compete at all levels,” al-Maliki said.

“We have gone from mass graves and torture chambers and chemical weapons ... to the rule of law and human rights,” he said. “And the human rights and freedoms embodied in the new Iraq and consolidated in the constitution have provided a fertile environment for the ever-growing number of civil society institutions, which are increasing in scope and complexity and provide a healthy reflection of what is developing beneath the violence.”

He pointed to the democratic process that led to the drafting and adoption of a new constitution and the formation of a national unity government representing all ethnic and sectarian groups as examples of political progress. He also pointed to the free press, the growing free-market economy and rising living standards as examples of social and economic progress.

The Iraqi prime minister added that it is imperative to move ahead with the economic reconstruction of the country and proposed that the reconstruction begin in the relatively peaceful provinces.

“We need to make an example out of these stable areas as models for the rest of the country,” he said. “Undoubtedly, reconstruction in these areas will fuel economic growth and show what a prosperous, stable, democratic and federal Iraq would look like.”

He urged the Congress to earmark a greater portion of the reconstruction funds for Iraqis and Iraqi companies, saying that foreign companies often have high operating and security costs.

Al-Maliki identified the two greatest threats to his coun-

try as terrorism and armed militias. He said terrorists seek to destroy Iraq’s political system and social order while militias infringe on the rightful role of the state to ensure its citizens’ security.

The prime minister pledged that the Iraqi people would remain steadfast in defending their newfound freedom.

“The journey has been perilous, and the future is not guaranteed. Yet many around the world ... underestimated the resolve of Iraq’s people and were sure that we would never reach this stage,” al-Maliki said. “Few believed in us. But you, the American people, did, and we are grateful for this.”

U.S. TO CONVERT 34 TONS OF PLUTONIUM INTO NUCLEAR FUEL

Energy official says project part of U.S.-Russia nonproliferation program

Washington -- The United States is on track to dispose of 34 metric tons of plutonium -- capable of making thousands of nuclear warheads -- “by irradiating it as fuel in nuclear reactors to produce electricity,” an Energy Department official says.

Ambassador Linton Brooks, under secretary of energy for nuclear security and administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration, told a House Armed Services subcommittee July 26 that of the approximately 50 metric tons of surplus plutonium in the U.S. inventory, 34 tons will be used as nuclear-reactor fuel.

In his prepared remarks, the under secretary said each country is committed to eliminating 34 metric tons of its surplus weapons-grade plutonium under a 2000 U.S.-Russian agreement. This U.S.-Russian plutonium disposition initiative is the largest U.S. nonproliferation program, according to Brooks.

Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman and Russian Federal Atomic Energy Agency Director Sergei Kiriyyenko earlier in July reaffirmed their commitment to implement the 2000 agreement.

To dispose of the U.S. plutonium, the Energy Department will construct three facilities at the Savannah River

Site in South Carolina to convert the plutonium into mixed uranium-plutonium oxide fuel, or MOX fuel, Brooks said. This mixed fuel then will be irradiated in nuclear reactors to produce electricity.

“Once the plutonium has been irradiated in a reactor, it has been converted to a form that can no longer be used in a nuclear weapon,” he said.

Brooks added that mixed uranium-plutonium oxide fuel technology is “well-established and mature,” and that it “is currently being used in more than 30 reactors worldwide.”

This mixed oxide fuel approach to plutonium disposal is the most effective and appropriate means for disposing of surplus weapons plutonium, Brooks said. He added that the most compelling reason for doing so is the joint nonproliferation aspect of the program. “We are disposing of our plutonium by fabricating it into fuel because we want Russia to do the same,” he said.

One objective of the threat-reduction program is to help Russia “secure or dispose of as much weapons material as possible, as swiftly as possible, to prevent any of this material from falling into the hands of those who wish us, or our allies, harm,” said Brooks.

“[I]n the long run the only way to permanently prevent the theft or diversion of this material is to dispose of it,” Brooks said.

“[P]roceeding with the current strategy engages the Russian government to honor its commitment to dispose of its plutonium,” said Brooks. “It demonstrates to the international community that the United States is committed to meeting its international nonproliferation obligations.”

For additional information about U.S. nonproliferation efforts, see Arms Control and Non-Proliferation. See also the full text of Brooks’ prepared statement. More information about the National Nuclear Security Administration’s program to eliminate weapons-grade plutonium production is available on the NNSA Web site.

PANELISTS SEE NEED FOR CHANGE IN U.S. VISA PROCESS

Suggest streamlined visa process, expanded Visa Waiver Program

By Kate Ericsson
Washington File Staff Writer

Washington -- U.S. visa policies can and should be improved, concluded a group of experts – including an official in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) – during a recent discussion at the Heritage Foundation in Washington.

During the July 24 panel titled “Rethinking Visa Policy for the 21st Century,” Stewart A. Baker, assistant secretary for policy at DHS, acknowledged that it could be difficult to obtain a U.S. visa. He said this raises questions about ways of streamlining the process to make it more efficient and “a lot less hassle for people.”

Another panelist, James Jay Carafano, a senior research fellow on defense and homeland security at the Heritage Foundation, emphasized how important it is for the United States to have a visa policy that promotes economic growth, builds strong alliances and contributes to the safety and security of the nation. He also stressed how important and personal the visa application process is for people who want to visit the United States.

Currently, 27 countries participate in the Visa Waiver Program (VWP), which allows people traveling to the United States for tourism or business to stay for up to 90 days without a visa. In addition to the 27 – mostly from Western Europe but including Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore, Brunei and Slovenia -- there are more than a dozen so-called VWP Roadmap Countries that have expressed interest. According to Baker, the VWP Roadmap Countries are Bulgaria, Cypress, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and South Korea.

To participate in VWP countries have to meet certain criteria concerning their immigration patterns, security, law enforcement and others. The visitors from VWP countries must have passports that are machine-readable and – depending on when the passport was issued – may have to meet certain other requirements.

“The last countries to join the VWP joined in 1999,” said Baker. “Since September 11 [2001, when the United

States was attacked by terrorists], no one has been added to the program, in part because of concerns about the security implications of adding to the VWP.” He said the United States is examining whether changes to the program should be made and whether it should be expanded, but he did not elaborate.

Carafano and another panelist, Dan Griswold, director of the Center for Trade and Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, said the Visa Waiver Program should be expanded. They said an expansion would enhance U.S. relations with other countries.

“I think the VWP has been a great success,” said Griswold. He said the U.S. government should “be exploring prudent ways” to expand the program. The Roadmap Countries do not present an additional security risk to the United States, he said.

“It’s hard to see a dividing line between those countries and the 27 countries already in the program, other than the matter of timing,” Griswold said.

Carafano suggested that expanding the Visa Waiver Program “to countries in Eastern Europe and Asia, where the United States has growing economic, cultural, and security ties could both strengthen America’s bonds to these nations and enhance security.”

Security would be enhanced, he claimed, because VWP countries “must maintain the same security standards as the United States.” Furthermore, “increased participation in VWP allows the Department of State and DHS to focus their assets on travelers from nations of greater concern,” Carafano added.

“Unfortunately, I am cautiously pessimistic that Congress will do anything,” said Griswold. “The House seems to be in the mood to build walls rather than take them down.”

“We will have to wait for a more opportune moment to expand the Visa Waiver Program,” he predicted.

The Heritage Foundation is a conservative policy research institution.

Additional information on the Visa Waiver Program is available on the State Department Web site.

Plases Note: Most texts and transcript mentioned in the U.S. Mission Daily Bulletin are available via our homepage: <http://geneva.usmission.gov/>

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